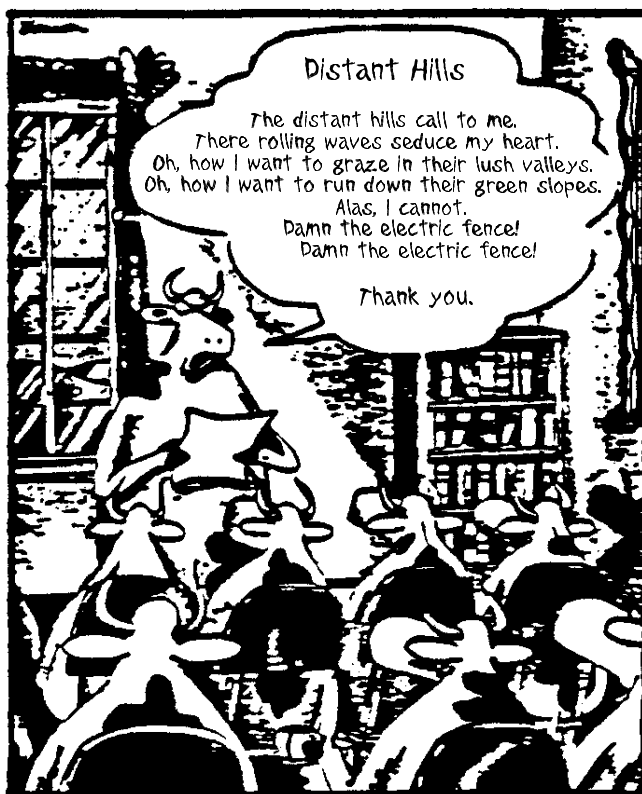


SENTENCE FLUENCY

Rhythm and cadence
Language with a beat
Variety & spice

The key to assessment is the word itself. It comes from the Latin verb *assidere*: to sit beside. We are not ranking here. We are sitting beside a piece of writing and observing its



cow poetry

qualities. We are finding a common language to talk about those qualities.

Barry Lane, "Quality in Writing"
Writing Teacher Magazine
January, 1996

FLUENCY

- ✓ RHYTHMIC PATTERNS
- ✓ NATURAL
- ✓ EASY-ON-THE-EAR FLOW
- ✓ EASY TO READ ALOUD
- ✓ POETIC, MUSICAL
- ✓ VARIETY
- ✓ FRAGMENTS EFFECTIVE

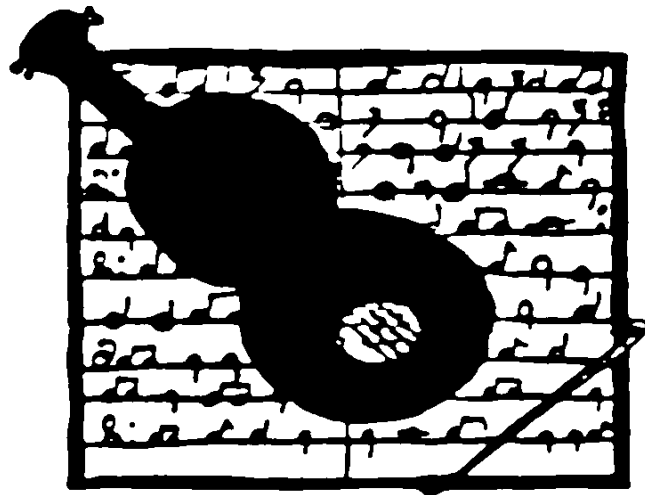
Sentence fluency is the rhythm and flow of the language, the sound of word patterns, the way in which the writing plays to the ear – not just to the eye.

SENTENCE FLUENCY

- Rhythm, flow, and natural cadence
- Smooth phrasing
- Well-built sentences
- Sentence length enhances the meaning
- Varied sentence beginnings

CAN YOU FEEL THE RHYTHM AND FLOW?

- ▶ In yesteryear, when Moby Dick was just a tadpole and the seas rolled and thundered over the jetties and onto the shore...
- ▶ In my old battered black wallet I carry many things. A letter from a friend. My lunch ticket. My social security card. Many other tidbits and items as well. There is one thing, however, which I prize above all my possessions. It is a photograph. It's small, and the photographer was not good. That does not matter. What matters is the person in the photograph. His name is Brian Sizemore...
- ▶ What is poetry
Poetry is moosick to me
on a piece of paper
Moosick that rhymes
Soft moosick to my
ears



SENTENCE FLUENCY

"Clarity, Clarity, Clarity. When you become hopelessly mired in a sentence, it is best to start fresh..."

*-Strunk and White
The Elements of Style*

Read what you write aloud and listen to the rhythm of the language. Do you like what your hear? Does it make you sit up and take notice, or are you lulled to sleep by the sing-song sameness of each sentence pattern? Writers who read a lot notice that they develop a feeling for sentences that some people call "sentence sense." It's that sense that there's more than one way to say a thing—but some ways just sound better than others.

Your sentences should be clear; they should make sense. Cut the deadwood. Don't say: "At this point in time, we feel we are about ready to begin to fight." Say, "Now we're ready to fight." Make every word work hard and your sentences will be powerful, full of punch.

Notice how your sentences begin. These beginnings are repetitive and boring: "We went to the beach. We had fun. We saw seagulls. We went home." Yawn! Vary the openings and combine very short sentences: "Despite being overrun with pesky seagulls, we had fun at the beach."

Don't let sentences drift on too long, either. If a sentence feels unwieldy, out of control, slice it in half. Make two sentences. As William Zinsser tells us, "There is no minimum length for a sentence that's acceptable...Among good writers it is the short sentence that predominates."

Read your work aloud and listen to the rhythm and flow of the words. Does the fluency match the mood and content? Long and flowing where the piece is descriptive and thoughtful; short and snappy where you need to make a point.

To write is to write is to write is to write is to write is to write is to write is to write.

--Gertrude Stein

SENTENCE FLUENCY

- Listen for the rhythm and cadence-even if the punctuation is not yet present or correct
- Sentences begin in different ways and often end in a noun or verb
- Creative and varied use of sentence length and structure
- The rhythm and cadence in the sentence underscores the important ideas
- Fragments are deliberate and add style & flair as suited to the topic and audience

KEY QUESTION:

Can you FEEL the words and phrases flow together as you read it aloud?

TRAIT:

SENTENCE FLUENCY

RATING OF 5 (STRONG): The writing has an *easy* flow and rhythm when read aloud. Sentences are well built, with consistently strong and varied structure that makes expressive oral reading easy and enjoyable.

- Sentence structure reflects logic and sense, helping to show how ideas relate. Purposeful sentence beginnings guide the reader readily from one sentence to another.
- The writing sounds natural and fluent; it glides along with one sentence flowing effortlessly into the next.
- Sentences display an effective combination of power and grace.
- Variation in sentence structure and length adds interest to the text.
- Fragments, if used at all, work well.
- Dialogue, if used, sounds natural.

RATING OF 3 (DEVELOPING): The text hums along efficiently for the most part, though it may lack a certain rhythm or grace. It tends to be more pleasant or businesslike than musical, more mechanical than fluid.

- The writer shows good control over simple sentence structure, more variable control over complex sentence structure.
- Sentences may not seem skillfully crafted or musical, but they are grammatical and solid. They hang together. They get the job done.
- The writer may tend to favor a particular pattern (e.g., subject-verb, subject-verb), but there is at least some variation in sentence length and structure (sentence beginnings are NOT all alike).
- The reader sometimes has to hunt for clues (e.g., connecting words like however, therefore, naturally, on the other hand, to be specific, for example, next, first of all, later, still, etc.) that show how one sentence leads into the next.
- Some parts of the text invite expressive oral reading; others may be a little stiff, choppy or awkward. Over all, though, it's pretty easy to read this paper aloud if you practice.

RATING OF 1 (BEGINNING): The paper is difficult to follow or read aloud. Most sentences tend to be choppy, incomplete, rambling, or awkward; they need work. More than one of the following problems is likely to be evident:

- Sentences do not sound natural, the way someone might speak. Word patterns are often jarring or irregular, forcing the reader to pause or read over.
- Sentence structure tends to obscure meaning, rather than showing the reader how ideas relate.
- Word patterns are very monotonous (e.g., subject-verb, subject-verb-object). There is little or no real variety in length or structure.
- Sentences may be very choppy, or words may run together in one giant "sentence" linked by "and's" or other connectives.

SENTENCE FLUENCY

5 The writing has an easy flow, rhythm and cadence. Sentences are well built, with strong and varied structure that invites expressive oral reading.

- Sentences are constructed in a way that underscores the meaning.
- Purposeful and varied sentence beginnings add variety and show how each sentence relates to and builds upon the one before it.
- The writing has cadence; the writer has thought about the sound of the words as well as the meaning.
- Sentences vary in length as well as structure.
- Fragments, if used, add style. Dialogue, if used, sounds natural.

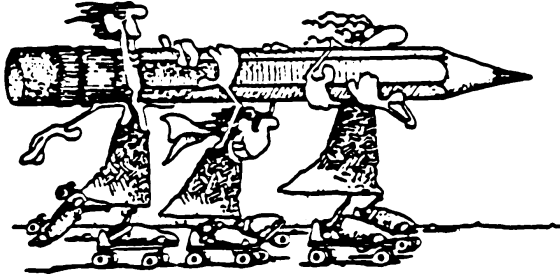
3 The text hums along with a steady beat, but tends to be more pleasant or businesslike than musical, more mechanical than fluid.

- Sentences may not seem artfully crafted or musical, but they are usually grammatical. They hang together. They get the job done in a routine fashion.
- There is at least some variation in sentence length and structure. Sentence beginnings are not ALL alike.
- The reader sometimes has to hunt for clues (e.g., connecting words and phrases like however, therefore, naturally, after a while, on the other hand, to be specific, for example, next, first of all, later, but as it turned out, although, etc.) that show how sentences interrelate.
- Parts of the text invite expressive oral reading; others may be stiff, awkward, choppy or gangly.

1 The reader has to practice quite a bit in order to give this paper a fair interpretive reading. The writing reflects more than one of the following problems:

- Sentences are choppy, incomplete, rambling or awkward; they need work.
- Phrasing does not sound natural. The patterns may create a sing-song rhythm that lulls the reader to sleep.
- Many sentences begin the same way—and may follow the same patterns (e.g., subject-verb-object) in a monotonous pattern.
- Endless connectives (and, and so, but then, because, and then, etc.) create a massive jumble of language in which clear sentence beginnings and endings get swallowed up.
- The text does not invite expressive oral reading. There is little to no “sentence sense” present. Even if this piece was flawlessly edited, the sentences would not hang together.

SENTENCE FLUENCY



5 PAPER-VARIED AND NATURAL

The sentences in my paper are clear and delightful to read aloud.

- Some sentences are long and stretchy, while some are short and snappy.
- It's easy to read my paper aloud. I love the sound.
- Sentence beginnings vary; they show how ideas connect.
- You can tell that I have good 'sentencesense' because my paper just flows.
- All excess baggage has been cut. I've economized with words.

3 PAPER-ROUTINE AND FUNCTIONAL

Some sentences are choppy or awkward, but most are clear.

- Some of my sentences are smooth and natural, but others are halting.
- Sentence beginnings are more alike than different.
- I need to add linking words (Therefore...Later...For this reason...When this happened...) to show how sentences connect.
- Some sentences should merge; others need to be cut in two.
- I have used more words than necessary—I still need to trim some deadwood.

1 PAPER-NEEDS WORK

Because there isn't enough 'sentencesense' yet, this paper is difficult to read aloud, even with practice.

- As I read my paper, I have to go back, stop, and read over, just to figure out the sentences.
- I'm having a hard time telling where one sentence stops and another begins.
- The sentence patterns in my paper are so repetitive they might put my reader to sleep!
- I have to do quite a bit of oral editing (leaving some words out, putting some others in) just to help the listener get the meaning.

SENTENCE FLUENCY

5 MY SENTENCES ARE CLEAR, VARIED, AND A TREAT TO READ ALOUD!!

- Go ahead-read it aloud. No rehearsal necessary!
- Sentence variety is my middle name.
- Deadwood has been cut.
- Smooth as a ski run in December.

3 MY SENTENCES ARE CLEAR AND READABLE.

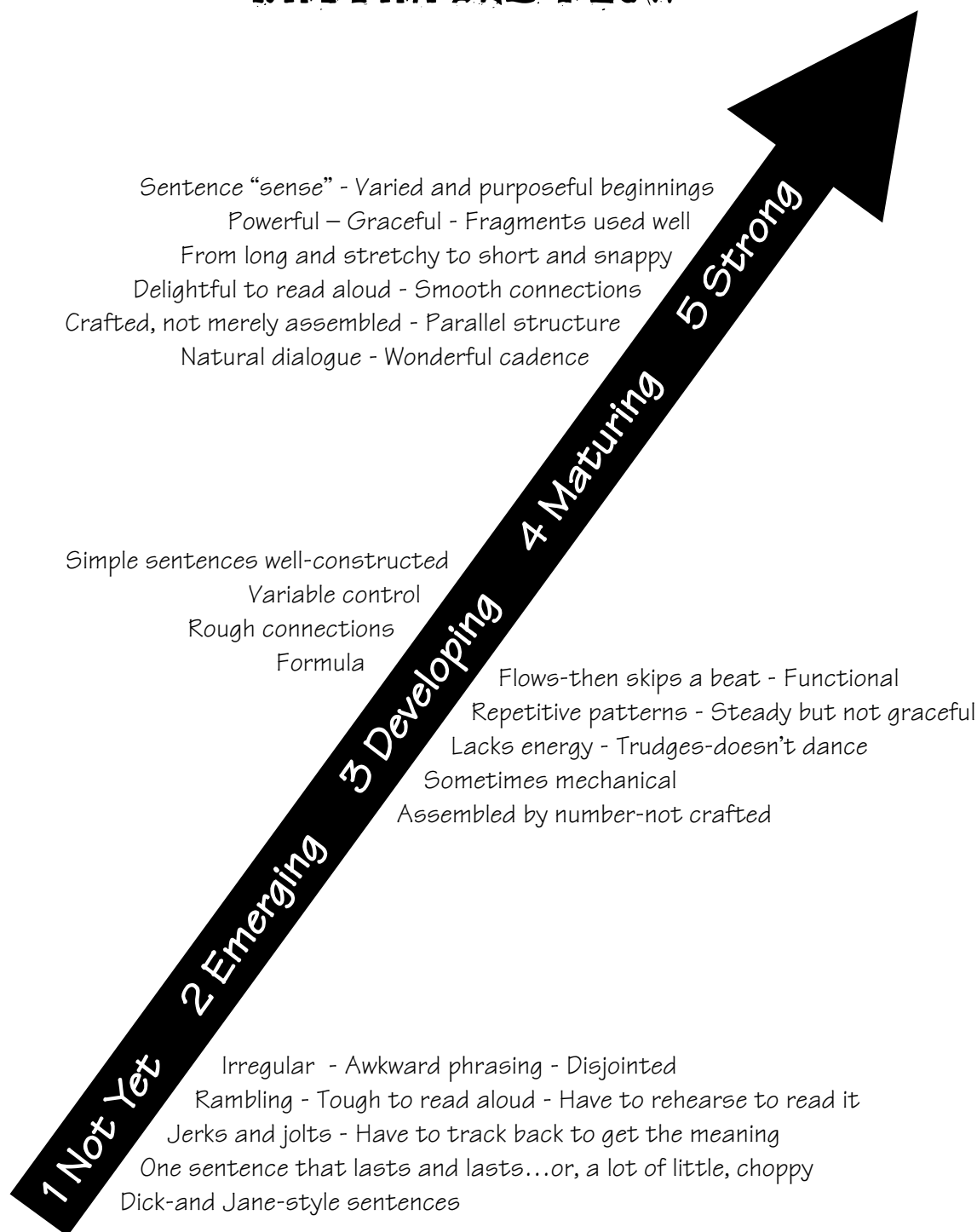
- Pretty smooth & natural-with just a bump or two.
- Some sentences could merge; some need to be cut in two.
- A little deadwood-but it doesn't bury the good ideas!
- Yeah, I got into a rut with those sentence beginnings.

1 I HAVE TO ADMIT, IT'S A CHALLENGE TO READ ALOUD!

- You might have to stop or re-read to make sense of this.
- It's hard to tell where one sentence stops and the next begins.
- Bumpity, bump, bump, bump...

FLUENCY

-RHYTHM AND FLOW-



SENTENCE FLUENCY IN CONTEXT

Sentence Fluency takes time to develop because it depends so heavily on kids' ability to read, and to appreciate the subtle qualities of the way words sound when they follow one another in sentence after sentence. Look for writing that seems to come naturally to your students; words that flow easily as you read them; language that's as smooth and as clear as a mountain stream, or in this case, a rill.

The Life of Randy the Rill

Simple, conversational style flows easily from sentence to sentence.

Use of alliteration in names hints at the playful, flowing quality of the writing.

Notice the pleasing and consistent rhythm that the author sustains as he wades into the body of the piece.

As you read this paragraph, notice how much alliteration the author uses. It's all over the place in phrases like "...rattlesnake plantain produces perfect cover." And elsewhere.

A long sentence sandwiched in between two shorter ones- nice variation in sentence length.

Nice pseudo-parallelism here with two sentences back to back containing subordinate clauses introduced by "where...".

Hi, my name is Randy the Rill. You may not have heard that word before, so here's a little background. A rill is a very small stream. Some rills are the kind that just drain an area when it rains. That is important, so there won't be floods. My sister, Ronda the Rill, is of this type. But, aaahh, back to me I'm pretty important, too, ya know. I drain a small pond just east of Wilkeson. If I wasn't here, he'd just burst.

Besides keeping that guy in business, I also support a variety of animal life. There is a family of deer that lives on the ridge above me that consists of a man and two fawns. I occasionally see the father around, also. But every morning, those two cuties come down to one of my larger pools to drink. Boy, that really tickles! At least they don't wade through me. I also support a healthy population of cutthroat and resident seelhead. There is a population of caddis and mayflies that also hatch here. The fish I mentioned earlier do a good job of keeping them under control. In turn the fish are the first choice of the Raccoon family (you should see the little tikes try to catch those cutthroat). Some other animals that I support are salamanders, toads, frogs, snakes, rabbits, and squirrels.

I also support many plant varieties. The ferns do a good job of keeping my waters cool, and the old spruce log that fell built a pool with a nice cascading waterfall that does a good job aerating my waters, along with the other waterfalls I own. The pool I just mentioned is deep, with a pebbly bottom and crystal clear water. The wide selection of moss and lichen does a good job of keeping the soil around me from eroding away. The lush forest around me is perhaps the prettiest in the world. The wild blue huckleberry around me is in full strength. On a warm, sunny day I can smell the light fragrance of them. In the lower reaches of me, I meander through a little dell, lush with little grand fir only 2ft. high, huckleberry, and wandering strawberry. The bright green club moss is in abundance here, carpeting the fertile topsoil. Here and there a little newt pauses in it's courting, and when alarmed, scurries for the shelter of a nearby nursery log, where wild mushrooms sprout up like groups of little elf umbrellas. Under a nearby fir, a small mouse pauses in it's search for food, where rattlesnake plantain produces perfect cover. In the open, where the sun has penetrated the old growth spruce, wild mint and clover create a sweet smelling perfume. Another plant I'll mention is... My gosh, is that thunder I hear? That pond is in for a beating now! Well, no time to talk! I have a pond to drain. Will I ever rest!?!

SIX TRAIT WRITING

WARM-UPS

TRAIT #5: SENTENCE FLUENCY

PREPARATION

EXERCISE

FOLLOW-UP

1.	A selection from a basal pre primer and a selection from a good anthology	Read each aloud. Ask which is more enjoyable to listen to. Ask why. (Direct discussion toward choppy vs. smooth)	Point out how adding some longer sentences makes the selection read smoother.
2.	A few limericks	Read the limericks aloud. Ask what makes them fun to listen to and read.	Talk about how writing can "flow" easily.
3.	A few nursery rhymes (display on overhead or have copies for each child)	Read the rhymes chorally. Ask what makes them easy to read aloud together. Emphasize the flow.	Talk about how words can fit together in an easy way.
4.	Display a selection (from your collection) full of sentence fragments.	Ask students what's wrong with the selection. Then ask them to help you rewrite the selection making complete sentences. Read it aloud and have the children compare the way it sounded before and after.	Talk about the importance of sentence structure.
5.	Display a selection full of short (3 and 4 word) sentences — i.e. We came home. We ate cookies. We played games.....etc.	Write on the board: "Afterschool, we rode our bikes home and shared a plate of home made chocolate chip cookies. Then we decided to play a quick game of Chinese Checkers followed by our favorite Monopoly." Ask students which sounds better and why.	Talk about ways to make sentences flow better.
6.	Display a sentence with too many adjectives or too long a listing of objects.	Ask students to help you rewrite the sentence as two or three more manageable sentences. See if these read more easily.	Point out the need not to cram too much into one sentence.
7.	Display an example of good sentence fluency (from your collection).	Have children count the words in each sentence. Ask them what they notice about the sentence lengths.	Talk about the need to vary sentence length
8.	Display an example of poor sentence fluency (from your collection).	Ask children to help you rewrite it, verifying sentence lengths. See if that improves it.	Point out how varying sentence lengths can improve writing.
9.	Display a selection (from your collection) in which many of the sentences begin in the same way.	Ask students what they notice. Ask them how it could be improved. Ask them to help you rewrite it. Compare how the two versions sound when read aloud.	Point out the need for variety in sentence beginnings.
10.	Display a selection (from your collection) of an "endless sentence". (and, and, and...)	Ask students what's wrong with it and then ask for suggestions as to how to break it up into manageable sentences. Ask why it's important in good writing not to go on and on and on.	Emphasize that longer is not always better.

SENTENCE FLUENCY

Any activity that allows students to practice...

Developing an ear by reading aloud

-Literature, journalism, poetry, whatever-

Practicing free-writing to make writing flow

Using choral reading to hear phrasing

Writing poetry

Playing with sentences

1. PEOPLE SENTENCES

Print individual words or short phrases (e.g. laughing like crazy, behind the barn, careening around the corner, Jonas and Isabella began, just then, etc.) on large cards, and deal them to students. Ask them to form sentences by lining up with the cards showing face out. Move students around to change the results. Ask observers to read aloud as the players move. Discuss which phrases are moveable and which are not and WHY. See if students can figure out for themselves which people (cards) can be eliminated without ruining the sentence.

2. CHORAL READING

Nothing helps kids see the difference a pause or inflection can make than to try and read a passage or poem aloud with other people-simultaneously. They have to carefully plan where to breathe, stop, start, raise and lower their voices. They must study the text for clues that will help them decide how best to read the sentence or phrase. This is a terrific place to use some of your favorite poetry. One of mine is Paul Fleishman's Joyful Noise. Poems for Two Voices.

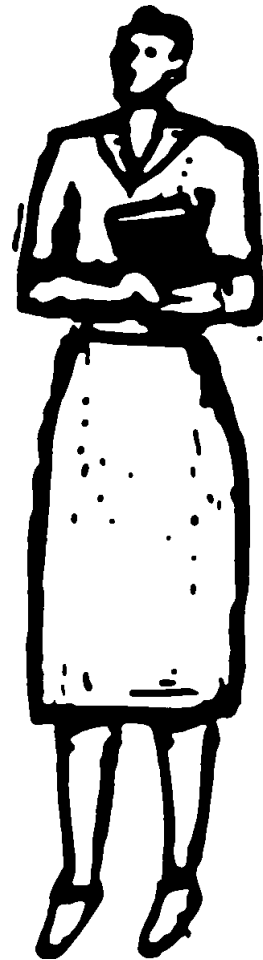


3. HUNT FOR THE LONGEST AND SHORTEST

Give students a stack of books-texts as well as novels, and comb through them for the longest sentence they can find. Once small groups have found some, read them aloud. Whose sentence is long, but still makes sense? Whose doesn't? Now do the same thing with the shortest sentence. Chances are, someone will come up with the idea that one word is sometimes used as a complete sentence. What do you think-is it or isn't it? This is a good time to discuss the basics of what sentences are and aren't and how fragments and other devices are used for stylistic effect.

4. GRAMMAR CRAMMER

Give students 4-5 well constructed sentences. Ask them to take out all the prepositional phrases and read back what is left. (If they don't know what prepositional phrases are- this is a teachable moment!) then ask them to take out all the adverbial phrases. (Don't know what those are? This is the teachable moment!) Now go after adjectives, conjunctions, adverbs, articles and finally the verbs and nouns. At each step, ask the students when the sentence stops becoming a sentence. And when is it just a shorter sentence?



IDEAS AND STRATEGIES SENTENCE FLUENCY

1. Read lots and lots of poetry picture books aloud and ask- "What makes language flow?" Make a list of ideas and find examples of prose picture books with good fluency.
2. Type the text of a picture book without any sentence breaks and then rewrite it showing the natural fluency through sentences.
3. Make a list of sentence beginnings that show variety.
4. Tell a story/explain a concept aloud before you try to write it. Ask a partner to write down the beginning of each of your sentences as you speak.
5. Choral Reading-Nothing helps kids see the difference a pause or inflection can make than to try and read a passage or poem aloud with other people-simultaneously. They have to carefully plan where to breathe, stop, start, raise, and lower their voices. They must study the text for clues that will help them decide how best to read the sentence or phrase. This is a terrific place to use some of your favorite poetry. One of mine is Paul Fleishman's Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voice.
6. Hunt for the Longest and Shortest-Give students a stack of books-texts as well as novels, and comb through them for the longest sentence they can find. Once small groups have found some, read them aloud. Whose sentence is long, but still makes sense? Whose doesn't? Now do the same thing with the shortest sentence. Chances are, someone will come up with the idea that one word is sometimes used as a complete sentence. What do you think-is it or isn't it? This is a good time to discuss the basics of what sentences are and aren't and how fragments and other devices are used for stylistic effect.
7. Share rhythmic language that's fun to read aloud. Poetry is an excellent choice, but be sure the rhymes are creative and the language natural. Some poems work so hard at rhyming that much of the natural flow is lost. Rehearse. Read it aloud before you share it with students, so it will feel natural. Remember that some prose pieces have wonderful rhythm, too. Hearing good language read aloud builds fluency even with young writers who are themselves not ready to begin writing sentences.
8. Share two versions of writing with the same content but a very different sound. Write one with short, choppy sentences: We went to the beach. It was sunny. It was warm. We had fun. We flew kites. We ate snack. VERSUS: We spent a warm, sunny day at the beach eating snacks and flying kites. Ask students which they prefer and why. You may need to share a number of examples before students begin to hear the differences. Keep sharing. Keep asking.
9. Play the sentence-building game; you can do this on the board or just orally. Have students choose a topic: money, baseball, school, cats, etc. then you come up with sentence beginnings and ask them to finish each sentence. Give them only one sentence beginning at a time. The only rule is you have to make up a complete sentence. For instance, you might come up with the beginning, "In the morning..." When students add their ending, the sentence might turn into, "In the morning, our cat is hungry." The purpose of this game is to help students become aware that sentences can begin in many ways. So use your imagination to come up with lots of variety. Use six or seven beginnings or more each time you play. Variation: Let them give YOU the beginnings, and you come up with the answers by completing the sentences.
10. Awareness of Audience: The single strongest strategy is to provide students with opportunities to write to a variety of audiences: parent, newspaper, businesses, friends, teachers, etc. Look for those "teachable moments" as they arise where students can write for a real purpose and audience such as: solving a playground problem, suggesting a change in the lunchroom, responding to a community issue, etc.
11. Take a list of very specific audiences (such as: principal, friend, parent), topics (such as: problem, solution, idea), and forms (such as: friendly letters, letter of complaint). Have students mix and match them. Students are to write with an appropriate voice for the combination they have selected.
12. Transitions: Post classroom rules that prohibit the use of weak transition words such as: and, so, then or any combination of them used at the beginning of a sentence. This nudges students to investigate new words and evaluate the use of transitions.

Examples of enhanced sentence fluency to share with your students.

- ✓ In yesteryear, when Moby Dick was just a tadpole and the seas rolled and thundered over the jetties and onto the shore...
- ✓ In my old battered black wallet I carry many things. A letter from a friend. My lunch ticket. My social security card. Many other tidbits and items as well. There is one thing, however, which I prize above all my possessions. It is a photograph. It's small, and the photographer was not good. That does not matter. What matters is the person in the photograph. His name is Brian Sizemore.



USE PICTURE BOOKS TO TEACH THE TRAIT OF:

SENTENCE FLUENCY

- Read poetry aloud and ask, “What makes the language flow?” Make a list of ideas. Do the same with prose
- Use choral reading to practice hearing where and how sentences and phrases begin and end. Emphasize inflections, pauses, etc.
- Type the text of a picture book without any sentence breaks; then rewrite it, showing the natural fluency through sentences, patterns and punctuation
- List sentence beginnings to see how much variety authors use. Read two or three picture books and count how many simple, compound, and complex sentences are in each. Why do some sentence patterns work better in certain sections of the text?
- Tell a story/explain a concept aloud before you try to write it. Ask a partner to write down the beginning of each sentence as you speak.



SENTENCE FLUENCY

Alexander Y El Dia Terrible, Horrible, Espantoso Horrroso

Celebrate America In Poetry and Art

Consider the Lemming

Dogteam

The Ghost Dance

The Great Migration: An American Story

Hairs & Pelitos

Harlem

Heartland

Hoops

I Live in Music

If I Were in Charge of the World, and Other Worries

Isla

My Mama Had a Dancing Heart

My Mama Says There Aren't Any Zombies, Ghosts, Vampires

My Painted House, My Friendly Chicken and Me

Nappy Hair

A River Dream

The Sign of the Seahorse

Slugs

The Table Where Rich People Sit

Time for Bed

A Visit to William Blake's Inn: Poems for the Innocent and Experienced Travelers

Wombat Divine

Work Song

Resource:
Picture Books
An Annotated Bibliography
With Activities For Teaching
Writing by Ruth Culham